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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the results of seven questions asked to secondary level department chairmen regarding the unit tests which accompany textbook materials. Nearly 1,500 responses were received from teachers of French, German, and Spanish. The results indicate that most teachers do not use publishers tests when they are available. The questionnaire also investigates attitudes toward objective tests, and the optimum length of unit tests and the final examination, and analyzes differences in attitude among teachers of the three languages. (Author)

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TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD PUBLISHERS' TESTS

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TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD PUBLISHERS' TESTS

Charles Stansfield, University of Colorado

Since the latter half of the 1960's, it has been customary for commercial publishers to issue a series of classroom tests to accompany their textbook materials. I have found the reaction to these to be mostly favorable among those who use them, especially during the first couple of years and so long as the students perform fairly well. Yet, a look at the supplementary tests published by such companies as Holt, Rinehart, and Winston; Harcourt, Brace and Jovenovich; Macmillan; Rand McNally; Houghton-Mifflin; and McGraw-Hill, shows considerable differences in style and format. Some are limited to objective type items which can be easily scored. Others contain non-objective items almost exclusively. Some tests only assess reading and writing, while others assess listening, reading, and writing, and some assess all four skills. Some tests contain only 20 items while others contain 60 or more.

When a publishing house develops a new series of materials, perhaps the major question it faces is one of finances. Given an unlimited sales potential, it could develop supplementary materials

of all kinds. But today editors know that enrollments are down, the competition is fierce, and money for purchasing is limited, with the result that it is necessary to make : : early but critical decisions as to which ancillary materials are essential to the sale of a text, and which are not. In short, the publisher is frequently faced with a dilemma: teachers request that all kinds of materials be developed, but frequently do not purchase them if they are. Examples of such supplementary materials include teacher's manuals, teacher's editions of the text, vocabulary cards, workbooks, laboratory manuals, individualized study guides, transparencies, filmstrips, dialog posters, 16 mm. films, separate readers, reel-to-reel tapes, cassette tapes, and unit tests.

In order to resolve this problem, at least one publisher, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, has been wise enough to conduct a scientific survey of the foreign language teaching population.

In the Spring of 1974, this writer chaired a team which developed a 125 item questionnaire for teachers on high school foreign language materials. Other members of the committee included: Mary Sexton, a teacher of French at Ranum High School in Denver; Doctor Arno Preller, professor of German at Colorado State University in Fort Collins; and Roy Gabriel, a Ph.D. candidate in Educational Research at the University of Colorado in Boulder. The committee met all day for

five consecutive Saturdays in order to develop its survey instrument. It was pretested on ten foreign language teachers at different schools in the Denver area, by having each read and respond to all items. A committee member was present to answer any questions or clarify any matters which seemed unclear, after which the member took notes on the problem for discussion at the final meeting. Following some brief revisions and a second pretesting on three more teachers, the instrument was printed by the publisher and mailed to 3,500 secondary school department chairmen throughout the country on April 19, 1974. A business reply envelope, separate mark-sense answer sheet, and number two soft-lead pencil were also included in the packet. Of the 3,500 questionnaires sent, 1,424 were returned to the publisher. The data were then tallied by computer and the results displayed on a computer printout.

Although the main corpus of the results must remain confidential, I can report to you on the responses to the seven questions concerning supplementary tests.

RESULTS

Perhaps most surprising to testing specialists and publishers alike is the finding that 2/3 of the teachers claim that they never use any tests they have not themselves prepared. In response to the

question, "How frequently do you prepare your own tests?", 67% marked always, 28% sometimes, 2% rarely, and 1% never. The reliability of this response is corroborated by another item of the questionnaire which asks teachers to rank in order of importance the following supplementary materials: tapes, workbook, guide to individualization, teachers' manual, and tests. On this item, tests were ranked fourth, followed by the guide to individualization. Additional corroboration is found in a later item which asked the teachers to rank the same publishers' materials in frequency of use. Here again, the same order prevailed. It is interesting to note that only 50% of the German teachers responded always to this question. I have no satisfactory explanation to offer for this discrepancy but it does appear that German teachers are more likely to make use of publishers' tests than teachers of French or Spanish.

Another item which might illuminate this matter asks the question "How essential to a series do you consider publishers' supplementary tests to be?" with the options being very essential, somewhat essential, not essential, and I would not use them. While the modal response for all languages was somewhat essential, 28% of the German teachers responded very essential as compared to 19% of the French and Spanish teachers.

Authors of textbooks on testing, especially Rebecca Valette, have, for the past 50 years, been promoting the "new type" or objective test item, which can be more reliably scored. One advantage of such tests when applied to foreign languages is that they do not require students to waste time rewriting entire sentences when the instructor is only interested in grading for a particular learning problem such as verb, object pronoun, or adjective placement. Because of this, with the objective test, it is possible to give the student a greater number of items in the same amount of time, which, of course, acts favorably on the question of content validity.[1]

In spite of the prestigous position occupied by objective tests in American education, and their apparent advantages, the foreign language department chairmen surveyed rejected them overwhelmingly. In response to the question "Should publishers' tests be based on true-false and multiple choice items?", 84% responded no, 6% yes, and 8% had no opinion. Again, German teachers were the most decidedly opposed to such tests, with only 4% responding yes, and 88% responding no.

The question of test length is an interesting one. One frequently hears complaints from teachers that publishers tests are too long, thus taking up too much time. Since World War II, the concept of the short quiz has become established. Actually the distinction of test versus quiz existed previously, but under the guise of examination versus

test.[2] At any rate, during the past decades the education profession has moved toward shorter, more frequent learning assessments. Psychologists claim that this is beneficial since frequent quizzes tend to reduce test anxiety.

Nevertheless, the results of the survey seem to indicate a preference for more lengthy tests. When asked to choose the optimum length for a publisher's test (20, 30, 40, or 50 minutes), the modal response was 40, which was preferred by 46% of the group. Here again German teachers differed from their colleagues in that their second preference was for 50 minute tests, whereas Spanish and French teachers preferred 30 minute over 50 minute tests by a two-to-one margin. This difference of opinion disappears however on the subject of final exams. Here, approximately half of all teachers clearly preferred a two-hour exam, over others of one hour or three hours in length. Ten percent of the teachers said they would not give a final examination.

CONCLUSIONS

It appears that the availability of supplementary tests is not a major factor among foreign language department chairmen in the selection of a textbook, since two-thirds do not even use them. Moreover, the ease and rapidity with which a multiple choice test can be graded

appears to offer little attraction to teachers. Rather, they would prefer to construct their own tests, and these are generally lengthy, nearly a full period long, and involve a more complete display of language competence than the multiple choice test offers. Apparently, foreign language teachers were never really attracted by the idea of testing a single linguistic problem objectively as described in Lado and Valette,[3] but rather they are common users of a more integrative approach to language assessment. It is also probable that teachers simply prefer to give their own test, rather than one constructed by someone else. Frankly, I doubt that the teacher made test is better than the publisher's test in reliability and validity, and it is probably often limited to the writing skill alone. When teacher-made speaking tests are used, Kalivoda has found them to be lacking in real communicative activity.[4] The tape recorded listening tests accompanying publishers materials are generally an enjoyable activity for students. Yet, perhaps these have been discarded due to the ambiguous pictures frequently used as a stimulus.[5] Again, it is doubtful that many teachers design their own listening tests except for the dictation.

The attitudes of German teachers merit further consideration. While they tend to use publisher's tests with greater frequency, at the same time they react more negatively to purely objective measures.

Perhaps German teachers are more united in their reservations about discrete-point tests, but still feel that publishers' tests offer certain advantages which they cannot easily duplicate, i.e., structured tests of listening, speaking, and reading. In this same vein, their preference for longer tests would seem to be an indication of a more thorough approach to assessment.

Since the size of the sample indicates the probable generalizeability of the data, this study poses several questions. At this point, research needs to be conducted on the type of test items most teachers prefer, and whether or not they are concerned with testing the four skills or even two of them.[6] If the results prove negative, and I suspect they might, teacher trainers must return to this problem with renewed vigor. In the final analysis, a test of only one skill is seriously lacking in validity, the most important concern of all.

NOTES

1. Julian C. Stanley and Kenneth Hopkins, Educational and Psychological Measurement and Evaluation, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1972), pp. 102-104.

2. A.E.G. Pilliner, "Subjective and Objective Testing", in Alan Davies, ed., Language Testing Symposium: A Psycholinguistic Approach, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 19-45.

3. Robert Lado, Language Testing (London: Longmans, Green, 1961). Rebecca Valette, Modern Language Testing: A Handbook (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1967).

4. Theodore B. Kalivoda, "Oral Testing in Secondary Schools", Modern Language Journal, Vol. 54, No. 4, (May, 1970), 328-30.

5. For a discussion of the problems often posed by pictorial stimuli see, John L.D. Clark, Foreign Language Testing: Theory and Practice, (Philadelphia: Center for Curriculum Development, 1972), p. 52. Clark also presents an interesting and generally favorable treatment of what he terms "textbook-related" tests on pages 148-153.

6. In a more general survey study of elementary and secondary school teacher attitudes, Goslin found that while teachers prefer to use objective items, they also simultaneously employ essay and short essay questions with considerable frequency. See David A. Goslin, Teachers and Testing (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1967), pp. 122-125.